ACC. NO. 45232
R65 8815

KOVILAVAN * SOUTH INDIA * LIBRARY, KOVILOOR
45232

Isanya Desikar, whose math is located just outside Tiruvannamalai on the old bradakslhina road, was a distinguished yogi who, like many before and after him, felt the spiritual call of Arunachala. He came and settled at the foot of the mountain quite late in his life, but nevertheless, by virtue of his intense and personal relationship with Arunachaleswara, he can still be regarded as one of the major saints of Arunachala. He was born in 1750 in a small village called Rayavelur, which is located near the River Palar in northern Tamil Nadu. His parents, Tiruneelakantha Desikar and Uma Parvathi, belonged to the local farming community. Prior to Isanya Desikar's birth, his parents had been unable to produce a son for many years. To solve this problem, they had prayed to Lord Murugan at Arunachala and had asked him to bless them with a son. When their prayers were answered, the child was given the name of Kandappan, one of the many names of Lord Murugan.

It soon became clear that he was a precocious child both spiritually and intellectually. When he was first sent to school, he astounded his teachers by reciting the lessons before they had even been taught. Then, while the other boys struggled to catch up, he would sit quietly in meditation. His father gave him Siva diksha at the age of seven and then bestowed the title of 'Desikar' on him. The title, which may have been a hereditary one, entitled and empowered the son to carry out the duties and functions of a guru. Isanya Desikar (a name he acquired much later in life) spent most of his childhood uneventfully, mostly sitting in meditation in his family house. When he reached the age of sixteen, his father decided it was time for him to get married. While Tiruneelakantha was looking for a bride from amongst his own relatives, Isanya Desikar, who had no inclination to get married, appealed to his mother.

'I don't want to become a samsari. We have been the slaves of Lord Siva since the days of our distant ancestors. My mind longs to see all the holy places associated with Him. Instead of marrying me off, give me permission to go on a pilgrimage.' His mother granted his request, and soon afterwards he set off on an extensive South India yatra. It seems he never went home again.

A major turning point in his life occurred at Chidambaram. After he had visited the temple there and had darshan of Lord Nataraja, he went to visit Sri Mouna Swami, a local saint who was reputed to be a siddha purusha. Mouna Swami lived on the northern bank of the Ayi tank in Chidambaram and appeared to be immersed in samadhi for most of the time. Isanya Desikar felt an immediate attraction to him, so much so that he decided to stay on in Chidambaram in the hope of getting both initiation into sannyasa and upadesa (teachings) from him. For some time Isanya Desikar begged for his food and had darshan of Mouna Swami twice a day, but the Swami himself appeared to pay little attention to him. Feeling that the Swami was ignoring him because he was not yet a mature enough devotee, Isanya Desikar decided that he would try to compensate for this lack by giving Mouna Swami a display of his earnestness. He took off all his clothes except for his loincloth and went and stood before Mouna Swami

during one of the heavy winter rains. When Mouna Swami saw him standing there, undaunted by the heavy rain and without the least trace of a shiver on his bare body, he took the blanket that was covering his own body and wrapped it around the shoulders of Isanya Desikar. Then, to Isanya Desikar's delight, he gave him the desired initiation and upadesa and afterwards put him into a state of deep meditation. To celebrate his acceptance, Isanya Desikar composed a five-verse poem in praise of Mouna Swami. In the first verse, he extolled the greatness of his new teacher.

> "Ever-perfect one! You have manifested in the world as the one who is steeped in the pure bliss of the experience of the expansive infinity that has no attributes. You have manifested as the Self-realised silence and as the embodiment of truth and grace to bring harmony among various beliefs. I, keeping my head at the feet of your devotees, regard you as the Lord himself who dances in space at Chidambaram and who is worshipped by the three worlds..."d

In the fifth and final verse, Isanya Desikar acknowledges that he cannot attain liberation through his own efforts or through his religious knowledge. He therefore requests Mouna Swami to bestow his grace on him and grant him absorption in the Self:

> "O Guru possessing Supreme Knowledge, known as the silent Guru living on the banks of the Ayi tank, what is the use of studying the scriptures and the many different arts? Of what avail is an extensive study of Vedanta and Siddhanta, expounding their meaning, or following the ways of various religions? It is easy to transcend samsara. Bless me with a supremely blissful absorption in the Self, in which one can see the emergence of your effulgent grace."

It is not recorded how long Isanya Desikar spent with Mouna Swami. It may well have been several years because, when he finally decided to leave Chidambaram to carry on with his pilgrimage, he had the long matted hair of an ascetic yogi and the reputation for being a siddha, a yogi with great powers. His biographer reports that he traveled stark naked and carried only a few insignia which marked him out as being a member of the South Indian order of siddha sannyasins. After leaving Chidambaram, he wandered around for some time and met at least two famous saints: a fellow siddha, Dakshinamurti Swami, who lived at Tiruvarur, and a man called Ugandalinga Jnana Desikar, a Guru and a Brahmanishta who lived in a village called Sikkal near Nagappattinam. When his wanderlust had abated, he decided to settle down and undergo a long period of solitary meditation. He soon found a suitable place—a large uninhabited cave on a small hill. The nearest town was Vettavalam, which is only a few miles from Tiruvannamalai, and the nearest village, a settlement called Pakkam, supplied him with his few bodily needs. He spent many years in this cave, apparently trying to immerse himself in the state of nirvikalpa samadhi. During

his stay there, he was partially supported by a local farmer, Muthuswami Udaiyar. This man visited the cave every day to offer milk from his cow. After several years of devoted service, Muthuswami Udaiyar's labors were indirectly rewarded when he found a hoard of treasure while he was digging the foundations of a house he was planning to build for himself. His neighbors refused to believe that he had come across the treasure accidentally. Instead, they decided that Isanya Desikar had used his powers to manufacture gold coins so that he could pay Muthuswami Udaiyar for his milk. The villagers who believed in this version of events went en masse to Isanya Desikar's cave and, after singing his praises in many ways, requested that he produce some gold coins for them as well. Isanya Desikar realized that he would no longer be able to meditate peacefully in an area where he had a reputation for manufacturing gold. So, when the importuning crowds had dispersed, he quietly slipped away and walked continuously until he reached Arunachala. He found a quiet place on the banks of the Goraknath tank in the western part of Tiruvannamalai and began to resume his meditation. It was not long before someone else came forward to support him. A local man, Arunachala Chettiar, had become depressed because he had been unable to produce a son even after many years of marriage. Many people had told him that his luck would change if he could only receive the grace of a holy man. He set out in search of such a person, encountered Isanya Desikar sitting in samadhi by the side of the Goraknath tank, and began to serve him with great devotion. Shortly afterward, some siddhas, who resided at Arunachala but who were invisible to ordinary men, came to Isanya Desikar and escorted him to an uninhabited mountain cave. Inside, there was a large mound of ripe fruits. The thought occurred to him that if one of these fruits was given to Arunachala Chettiar, he would beget a son. One of the siddhas read his mind and responded by saying, "You may fulfill his desire accordingly.

"The *siddhas* escorted Isanya Desikar back to his place by the tank after first giving him many of the fruits that he had seen in the cave. The fruit that was given to Arunachala Chettiar produced the desired result. Arunachala Chettiar was later given a bag of vibhuti by Isanya Desikar. It became a family heirloom, and several generations of his family found they could overcome any worldly problems by worshipping it. Muthuswami Udaiyar, the man who had served Isanya Desikar for many years while he had been meditating near Vettavalam, had become very unhappy when his holy man had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared without giving him any explanation. However, he was not left in this state of dejection for very long. One night, Lord Arunachaleswara himself appeared in one of his dreams in the guise of Isanya Desikar and said, "Dear son, don't feel sad. I am staying at the northeastern corner of Arunachala. You can come and see me there."

Then Arunachaleswara appeared in his own divine form to Isanya Desikar and told him, "Dear son, I have asked a devotee to come to the northeastern side of Arunachala to see you. Go there and meet him." As Isanya Desikar was walking towards the appointed rendezvous, he began to compose some of the verses that

were later known as Svaubhava Stotra Pamalai (Garland of Hymns of Self-Experience). These eventually numbered 117, all of which were addressed to Lord Arunachala. From the second verse onwards, it becomes clear that in discovering Arunachala, he had found both his true Guru and his God.

> "O Arunachala! Your devotees, recognizing you as the infinite reality who is grace embodied in the form of fire, beyond the reach of Brahma and Vishnu, sang in praise of your greatness. I, who have in a miraculous way found you and adopted you as my Guru, may say many things about you, but all I really know is that you are the great and adored Lord Arunagiri. I am unable to say anything more."

In another of his verses, he explains that it was Arunachala's power that stilled his mind and enabled him to discern the real nature of the mountain.

> "O Sat-chit-ananda, who stands as The Self is he, by the power of the Guru's love I recognized you as God. I praise and bow to the blissful form, vast as the sky. You made me silent; now grant me liberation."

The poem is a mixture of different meters, and the mood of the verses varies from self-deprecation to ecstasy. It may well be that they were composed on many different occasions, for the author sometimes complains about his faults and laments over his spiritual bondage, whereas at other times he exalts in the liberation that the grace of the Lord has granted him. Since it is traditional in Tamil literature for jnanis to write verses in which they take a devotee's standpoint and claim to be ignorant, deluded, suffering, etc., one cannot state authoritatively that one verse was written during his sadhana and another after his liberation. However, although the chronology of the verses will always remain problematic, there seems to be little doubt that Isanya Desikar eventually attained liberation through the redeeming grace of Arunachala. In one verse, for example, he sings:

> "In my identity with the body, I had the sense of 'I' and 'mine' in the three states of waking, dream, and sleep. By your gracious love, this sense has vanished like a dream. You made me turn to you, O Arunachala, you who burn like a flame. You burnt away my Self-forgetfulness."

The poem reveals a familiarity with some of the great works of the Tamil bhakti tradition, but the style is distinctively his own. Also, it is interesting to note that the language and philosophy of the verses are uncompromisingly Advaitic. Many of the great Arunachala saints who have written about the mountain were Saiva in orientation, and this is clearly reflected in the language of their poetry. Isanya Desikar was brought up and educated in the Saiva tradition, but his verses show that he felt more at home with the language and concepts of Vedanta:

"Is there any truth apart from the Self? Great men live without the illusory mind-screen, rooted in the reality of blissful no-thought. Abiding in the Self, totally free, they are the wise ones, free from karma."

He was enough of a Saiva to revere the mountain as Siva himself and its power of sakti, but none of the standard ideas of Siddhanta can be found in his verses. When he talks of Siva, he is not conceiving of him in a mythic or even an anthropomorphic form. He instead seems to regard Siva as being simultaneously pure awareness, the energy that created the manifest world, and the substance out of which the world was created:

"In the past, present, and future, you, the form grace, abide as the lofty Siva bliss which is the one life in all life.....

You are the Lord, the Guru, intelligence, the law, our goal. You are absorbed in the Self and you abide as the Self which is everything, with nothing separate from it. In myriad ways you engage in sport in the world of forms: I as you, you as I. O Supreme Infinite Siva! You shine within the devout as the Self that is awareness."

Scattered throughout the verses, there are occasional hints of the path that Isanya Desikar himself followed. Believing that the best and highest form of devotion to Arunachala could be practiced by abiding in a thought-free state, he directed his efforts towards cultivating inner silence:

"If you think without thoughts of that eternally blissful One who shines everywhere as the divine, as Sakti, as Siva - that bhakti itself is mukti. Thus proclaim the scriptures...

Realizing that all we have learned is but the work of God, and knowing that we cannot know anything by ourselves, to be in silence is the jnana that vouches freedom from rebirth. Speak not. See the unborn Self as chit, as Siva. That seeing is illumination."

When we left Isanya Desikar, he was walking toward the northeastern corner of the mountain to keep his appointment with the devotee, who had kept him supplied with milk for so many years. They soon found each other and resumed their former relationship.

Isanya Desikar then chose a spot under a banyan tree on the southern side of the Isanya tank and was soon spending most of his time immersed in samadhi. Muthuswami Udaiyar often visited him there, and each time he came he would bring food for Isanya Desikar and for any other devotees who happened to be with him.

When no devotees were near him, Isanya Desikar, who was then about sixty years of age, liked to sit naked, absorbed in samadhi. On such occasions, Lord

Arunachaleswara himself sometimes used to manifest in the form of a tiger to guard him and prevent anyone from disturbing him. Isanya Desikar knew what was happening. Each time he came out of the samadhi, he would fondly run his fingers through the fur of the tiger and address him lovingly as 'Arunachala, my Lord'. Occasionally, other tigers from the forest would come along and help Arunachaleswara with his guard duties. Isanya Desikar knew that the presence of the tigers would intimidate other people, so whenever he saw that devotees were about to visit him, he would send the tigers away by saying, 'My devotees may get frightened if they see you. Please keep away.'

After some time, Isanya Desikar moved to a nearby flower garden and took up residence there. Muthuswami Udaiyar, the man who had been feeding him for many years, persuaded the owners of the flower garden to donate a small portion of it so that Isanya Desikar could remain undisturbed there. The owners agreed and handed over about a third of the flower garden. Sri C. Subbiah, who wrote a biography of Isanya Desikar, states that from the day he took up residence in the northeastern corner of the flower garden he became known to the world as 'Isanya Desikar', for Isanya in Tamil means 'northeast'. This may well be true, but it seems just as likely that he acquired his name either by sitting by the side of the Isanya tank or merely by living for so many years on the northeastern side of the mountain.

As Isanya Desikar's fame began to spread, he began to attract devotees and disciples. One of them was a man called Pondy Arunachala Swamy, who is chiefly remembered for coming to a macabre end after going against his Guru's wishes. He was brought up in Pondicherry, but after he came under the influence of Isanya Desikar, he took sannyasa and moved to Tiruvannamalai. Since he had no family, his property was lying unclaimed in Pondicherry. It should be remembered that as a sannyasin he had no rights to it. Under Hindu law, the taking of sannyasa has the same legal implication as physical death. The sannyasin's relatives take over his property, and if there are no relatives, his former possessions become the property of the state.

Pondy Arunachala Swamy knew all this, so one day he suggested to Isanya Desikar, 'Why don't I go back to Pondicherry dressed as a householder and claim all my former property from the French government. Then I could sell it all and give all the proceeds to you." Isanya Desikar strongly disapproved of his disciple's plan. "We don't want any money,' he said, 'And furthermore, the sannyasin's robe, once donned, should never be removed. If you are still intent on going, I must warn you. You will not return!" Pondy Arunachala Swamy, who was aggrieved that the government had ended up with all his property, ignored the warning and went to Pondicherry to carry out the plan. He convinced the French government that he was the rightful owner of his ancestral property, took possession of it, and auctioned it off. He converted the proceeds into gold, which he loaded on the back of a bullock. His intention was to drive the bullock all the way to Tiruvannamalai with the valuable cargo strapped to its back. However, at the moment of his departure, when he struck the bullock with

a stick to make it start, the bullock, normally a very placid animal, turned on him and gored him to death. The cargo then became the property of the Pondicherry government, but instead of hiding it in their treasury, they decided to use some of it to commemorate the strange and unfortunate accident. They made a statue of Pondy Arunachala Swamy being gored by the bullock and installed it on the western side of Karuvadaikuppam near Muthialpet. The statue can still be seen there today.

A suitable epitaph for Pondy Arunachala Swami can be found in one of Isanya Desikar's verses to Arunachala:

> "Those who ceaselessly seek to find their treasure in gold do not find anything in it. Not knowing themselves, they vainly talk about this and that. Spiritual seekers realize that you alone are the treasure. You are the world, the creation, the Lord, the Mother. They [the spiritual seekers] know no one else but you, O Lord of Arunachala."

Isanya Desikar must have been one of the first Gurus in India to have a western devotee. His name was Ayton, and he was the District Collector for the region that extended from Tiruvannamalai to Vriddhachalam. He had heard about the greatness of Isanya Desikar and approached him in the hope of getting a cure for a chronic complaint. When Isanya Desikar saw him coming, he issued his standard warning to the tiger who had been keeping guard over him: 'Lord Arunachala! A European is coming. He may get frightened on seeing you. You had better stay away.' The tiger promptly withdrew. Ayton came near and prayed to Isanya Desikar to cure him of the tuberculosis from which he had been suffering for many years. Isanya Desikar smiled and after a brief pause spat on the ground. The moment he spat, Ayton was cured of the disease. Ayton then spoke to the holy man with both trepidation and devotion. 'Swami. I have recently acquired a large amount of land. I would like to offer your holiness as much as you need. It can be a permanent endowment in your name.'
Isanya Desikar smiled and asked tauntingly, "Will your land yield crops even during a drought?"

Then, pointing his finger towards Arunachaleswara and Apeetakuchamba, he added, "Here is a householder with two children and a large family. It is proper to give him any amount of land, but it is not proper to gift it to me, a sannyasin."

Ayton took leave of him but returned on many occasions. He got into the habit of addressing him reverentially and affectionately as 'Tata', which means 'grandfather'. It is said that before he began any new project he would always meditate on Isanya Desikar and invoke his blessing by saying, "Tata, please lead me in this work. It is your work." At the annual Deepam festival, Ayton would take the lead in dragging the huge temple chariot through the streets of Tiruvannamalai. However, before moving the chariot for the first time, he

would pick up one of the ropes and exclaim loudly: "Tata, you hold the rope and lead us!"The local people were all astounded that such a prominent British official should have such devotion towards a naked sannyasin.

Ayton made it a point always to attend and lead this annual festival, but one year he found himself stranded by floods on the southern side of the River Pennar just before the beginning of the festival. Knowing that he was expected to be at Arunachala to start the chariot on its journey, he called out to his mount: "Horse, I must see Tata and I must also get the Deepam festival started. Think of Tata and cross the river!" Without a moment's delay or hesitation, the horse leaped into the raging torrent of water and effortlessly waded to the other side. None of the other people who were stranded dared to follow, for they were all convinced that it would be suicidal to enter the surging waters. At the moment when Ayton put his faith in Tata and leaped into the water, Isanya Desikar opened his eyes after a long meditation and stretched out his hand in a southerly direction. When one of his disciples asked what he was doing, he replied, "If someone falls into a river, should we not save him?"

Ayton arrived safely and took Isanya Desikar's blessings to start the festival. When the news of Ayton's spectacular river crossing and Isanya Desikar's role in it spread among the Deepam crowds, many of them came to the northeastern side of the hill to see the man who had been responsible for the miracle. The guardian tigers had to withdraw for several days until the crowds subsided. Several of the new visitors turned out to be mature seekers who were looking for guidance from a Guru. Isanya Desikar accepted some as disciples, had a small thatched shed built to accommodate them, and gave instruction by writing a guide to liberation entitled "Jnana Kattalai."

In 1829, when Isanya Desikar was seventy-nine years old, he realized that death would soon come to him. He foresaw the time and date of his passing and wrote the information on a palm leaf that he then concealed under his seat. On the 26th day of the Tamil month of Margazhi, he told his oldest disciple somewhat cryptically, "Lord Nataraja is going to the thousand-pillared mantapam. We too should go there." Then he sat in meditation, facing north, with a slight smile on his face. Muthuswami Udaiyar, realizing that his master was about to give up his body, asked him, "What now will be the fate of us devotees?" Isanya Desikar replied, "Has not your family already ripened as a bunch?" and promptly abandoned his body. His devotees chose a samadhi site under a bilva tree nearby because they recollected that Isanya Desikar had occasionally stood there and gazed lovingly at the mountain. When the palm leaf that predicted his death was found shortly after his burial, the devotees had one last proof of their master's powers.